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## The Journey of a Spiritual Migrant: An Autoethnography on Leaving American Evangelicalism

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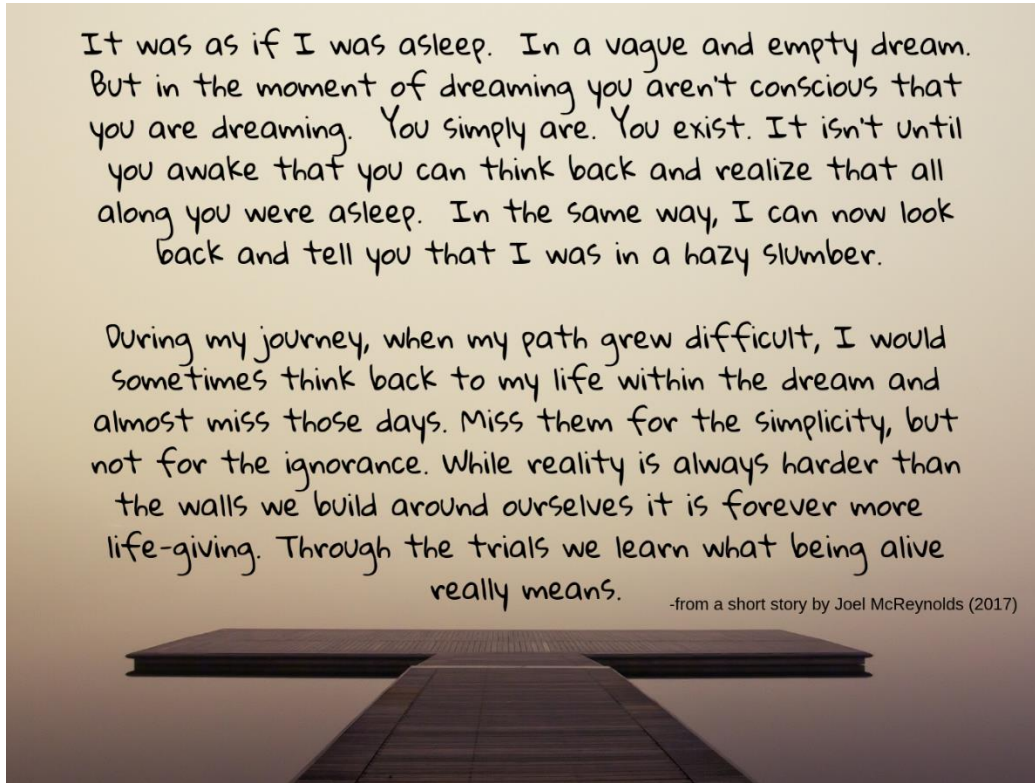
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It was as if I was asleep. In a vague and empty dream. But in the moment of dreaming you aren't conscious that you are dreaming. You simply are. You exist. It isn't until you awake that you can think back and realize that all along you were asleep. In the same way, I can now look back and tell you that I was in a hazy slumber.

During my journey, when my path grew difficult, I would sometimes think back to my life within the dream and almost miss those days. Miss them for the simplicity, but not for the ignorance. While reality is always harder than the walls we build around ourselves it is forever more life-giving. Through the trials we learn what being alive really means.

-from a short story by Joel McReynolds (2017)



My alarm went off and I rolled onto my side to reach my phone. I hadn't stayed up the night before to see the election results. I was confident Hillary Clinton would win. But as I looked at the notifications on my phone, a deep pit formed in my gut. Donald Trump had won. The symbol of anger, hate, and intolerance had won. The candidate that many evangelical Christians had gone to bed with, despite all his behavior and beliefs that contradicted the teachings of Jesus, had won.

I wanted to write on Facebook to let my friends know that I was not celebrating that morning. I spent a long time staring at my phone and wondering what words I could type. Nothing I said would make any difference, nothing could

describe what I was feeling, let alone what countless others who were far more affected than I was felt. Eventually, I updated my Facebook status:

November 9, 2016

*To all my friends who aren't white, straight, able-bodied men: I am sorry. My heart weighs heavy this day.*

The alliance between Trump and evangelicals, a group I considered myself a member of, could not be reconciled in my mind. The cognitive dissonance resulting from the faith I grew up believing cooperating with Trump's rhetoric was too much to explain away. A week after Trump's election, my friend sent me an article about Evangelicalism and Trump. He texted me, "I fear she's [the author] right about one thing: people are going to leave their faith because of this."

I didn't leave my faith, but I did leave my religious home. Although it had been building for some time, in one fell swoop of the election I had suddenly become a spiritual migrant. I could no longer find safe harbor within American Evangelicalism. I needed to set forth and find new land. The week after the election I was still confused about what course I should take. But by the time Intervarsity Press released the book *Still Evangelical?* (Labberton, 2018) my answer was a resounding "No!"

...

The election of Donald Trump was a catalyst for my spiritual migration, but I knew even then that it was not the only cause. My sense of insecurity came from

more than just evangelicals' support for Trump. There was more to it, but even years later it has been difficult for me to understand and explain. This paper is my attempt to understand my journey as a spiritual migrant, and in doing so, I hope to better articulate to others what I have experienced.

A tool I will use is the concept of human security. Human security, generally speaking, is the freedom from fear and want and is highly focused on the security of the individual over the collective. While often not discussed in relation to human security, "Religion and human security intersect, precisely, at the center of human social desires. These desires for safety and stability drive human security at its core," (Wellman., 2012, p.18). I came to evangelical Christianity through social networks (Stark & Finke, 2000) and my faith was inseparable from my daily life. It is what guided me and provided solidarity with fellow members of the same in-group.

Yet, to be a member of the group I had to accept moral binaries of what was right and wrong, true and false (Wellman, 2012, p.25). There was little room for gray area within this framework. The Bible was the only truth, Christianity was the only path, homosexuality was always wrong, evolution was a secular lie, Catholicism was not real Christianity, and only men should lead and be pastors. These dichotomous beliefs were taught and reinforced by a misguided attempt at reading the Bible without acknowledging the cultural and historical context, and when I began to question these binaries, I lost my place with the in-group and was

set adrift. During my journey, I have been nowhere near as insecure or unsafe as true migrants, religious minorities, or those struggling with a crisis of spiritual insecurity (Ashforth, 2010). Nevertheless, I experienced a sense of loss and insecurity when I left my familiar beliefs and subculture. Migration is never easy.

The process I am using to discover and tell this story is known as autoethnography. According to Sparkes (2000), autoethnographies are “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding,” (p.21). I am the subject of this research and hope to use autoethnography to better interpret my experiences. I sifted through old journal entries, blog posts, text messages, and my reading history to try to put together the historical lead-up and fallout of my spiritual migration. While I analyzed this historical data, I also kept contemporary records of my current experiences. By examining this data and sharing the results, I hope to construct a roadmap of where I have been and where I am right now in my spiritual migration.

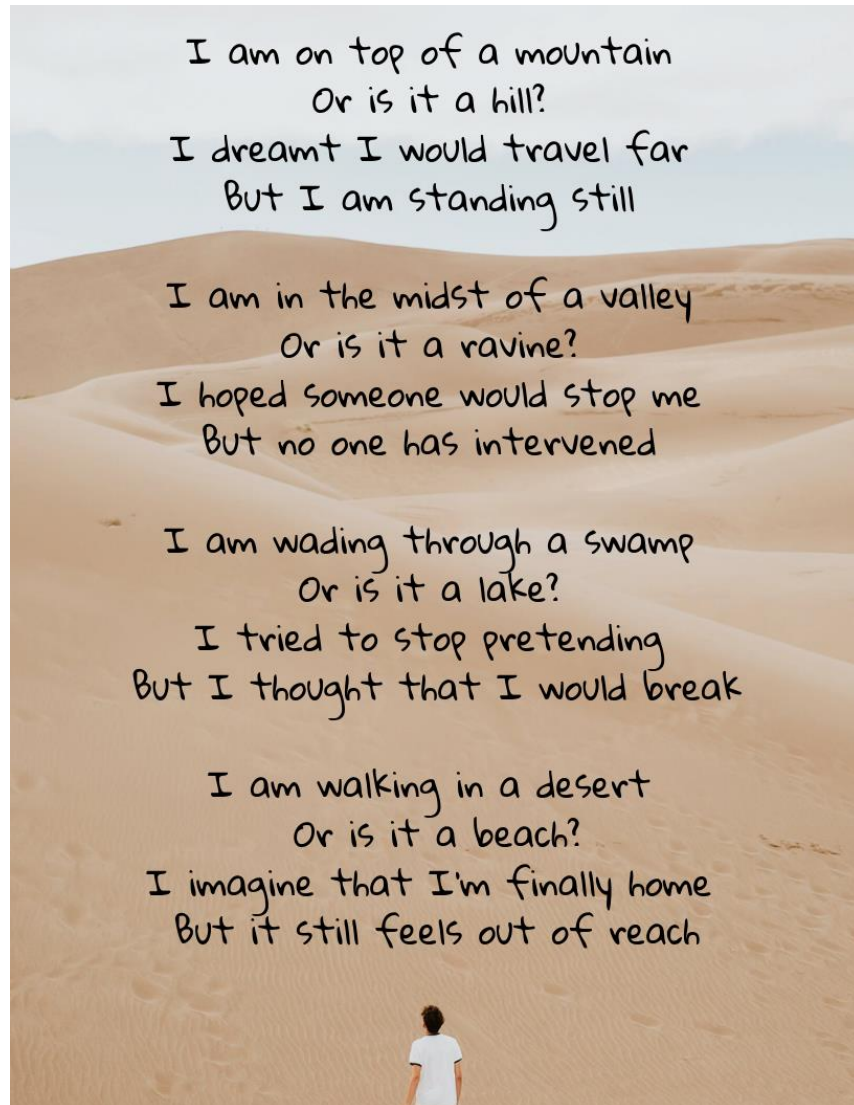
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While the Trump election forced me to suddenly pick up my spiritual baggage and seek shelter somewhere else besides American Evangelicalism, it was not an isolated incident of religious reevaluation. I grew up as an evangelical and I was conservative in most things political, social, and religious. I was taught the Bible was the inerrant Word of God, and that there were no mistakes or

contradictions within its verses. Anything that seemed like a contradiction or error could be explained away with a well-rehearsed response.

Within this environment, questions were welcomed, but only in so far as they were able to be answered. Doubt or questioning for the sake of itself was not permissible. But to ask, “Where did Cain’s wife come from?” or “Why does the Bible say God promoted genocide?” was okay since there was always an answer. Yet, despite this emphasis on certainty, uncertainty still crept in. There was space in my heart for open questions and mystery, although rarely discernable from the outside. I continued walking within the clearly delineated lines of Evangelicalism while still wondering inside if American Evangelicalism was the best expression of Christianity.

This questioning is witnessed in a poem I wrote while on a silent retreat by myself. On August 20, 2013, a week before beginning my senior year in college, I wrote the following:



Regardless of the poor artistry, the poem highlights the conflicting relationship I had begun to realize with Evangelicalism. Was my faith like walking on a beach or being lost in a desert? Was I at home in Evangelicalism or was I still searching?

...

During the process of my autoethnography, I was introduced to the work of James Fowler (1981). Based on previous psychosocial theories of development, Fowler's Stages of Faith (1981) suggests that there are different phases in one's spiritual development that a person will go through as they grow and mature. A chart of Fowler's six stages, in addition to Scott Peck's (1987) simplified four stages, is attached as Appendix A. When I wrote the previous poem, sitting on the top of a bluff in a national forest, I was beginning to question my place in Evangelicalism. I was in Fowler's Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional, or Peck's Formal-Institutional stage. I had an encompassing belief system and sought stability in my church. But I was beginning to push the edge of my box. Trump's election quickened that process.

Leading up to the 2016 election, there was much to shake my allegiance to Evangelicalism. Many prominent evangelical leaders openly supported Trump, despite his behavior and views that seemed so contrary to traditional, evangelical beliefs. Since this is an autoethnography I will leave the cultural analysis of Evangelicalism to others and focus on myself, however, one excellent overview of the relationship between Trump and evangelicals is "The Last Temptation" by Michael Gerson (2018).

What is important to understand for my own journey is simply that I could not reconcile the two contradictory classifications of "Trump supporter" and "evangelical Christian." I felt that Trump embodied the opposite of so much of what

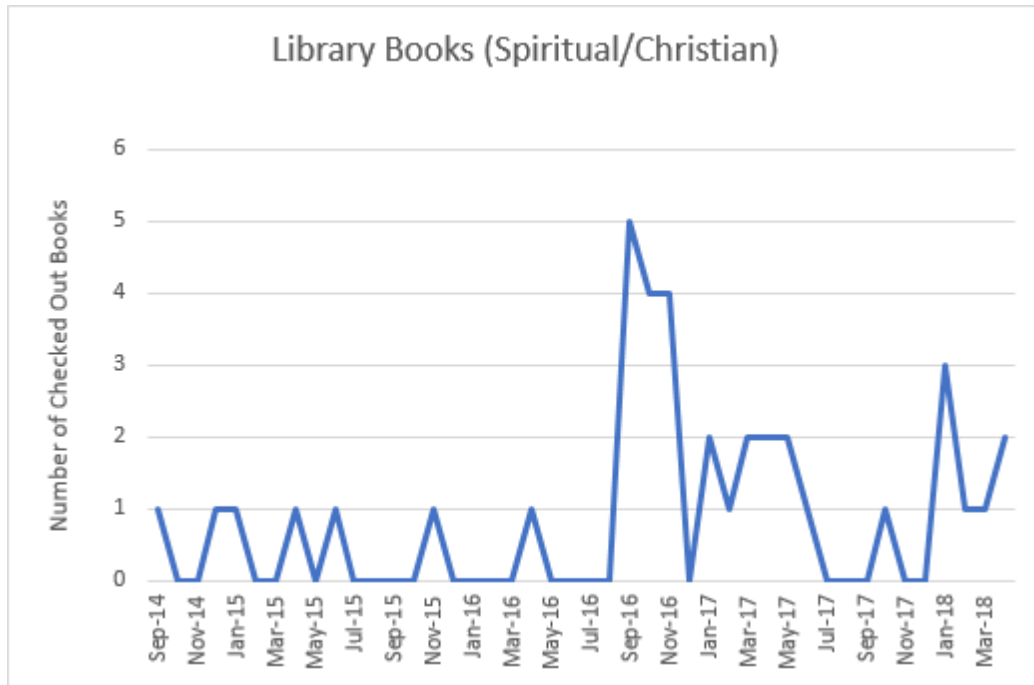


I grew up being taught was right: love of neighbor, promotion of family values, sexual and moral purity. I watched as my evangelical community tossed those values away in support of a candidate that was a way to accomplish their goals concerning abortion and Supreme Court justices. The culture I had been enmeshed in my whole life, a culture that emphasized being honest, fair, and just over winning suddenly was telling me that the ends justified the means.

I have always been an avid reader, but as the election neared, I read many more books concerning Evangelicalism. I needed to understand why evangelicals were behaving this way, and if there were other options. I did not want to throw away my Christian faith, but I could not imagine how to move forward within Evangelicalism. I turned to books that explored these same concerns, books like *Searching for Sunday* by Rachel Held Evans (2015) and *Chasing Francis* by Ian Morgan Cron (2013). Both books are about evangelicals becoming disillusioned by their fundamentalism and seeking something else.

While I do not have a record of the books I borrowed from friends or bought, my library list offers evidence of this sudden spike in books on this topic. From 2014-2016, I checked out only a book or two a month from the library concerning Christianity. As the 2016 elections loomed, I checked out five books in September, four books in October, and four books in November. This trend is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Library Books Checked Out on Christianity



As explained earlier, Fowler's (1981) third stage is made up of living within boundaries, but not realizing it. With my sudden schism from Evangelicalism, I realized I had been living in a box. As the quote that started this paper says, I had been asleep without realizing it. I knew I wanted to explore the world outside my walls but was not sure what the options even were.

One of the most influential books I read at this time was *God Seekers* by Richard Schmidt (2008). Schmidt's work is essentially a historical overview of Christianity. Each chapter focuses on a particular movement (e.g. Medieval English mysticism) and then focuses on a historical figure to represent that movement. Half

the chapter is background information on the person and the historical context, and the other half is a list of quotes from the featured person's writing. As I read *God Seekers* the walls of my box became more evident than ever, and I was exposed to a world of alternatives.

I learned that there are many different interpretations of Jesus' incarnation, atonement, and purpose. I learned that throughout history people have disagreed about how to read the Bible. I learned about Christian mysticism. Importantly, I learned that Evangelicalism, the flavor of Christianity I was taught was the most Biblical, most pure, most correct, was less than 150 years old. These revelations, in addition to the catalyst of Trump's election, thrust me into the world of a spiritual migrant.

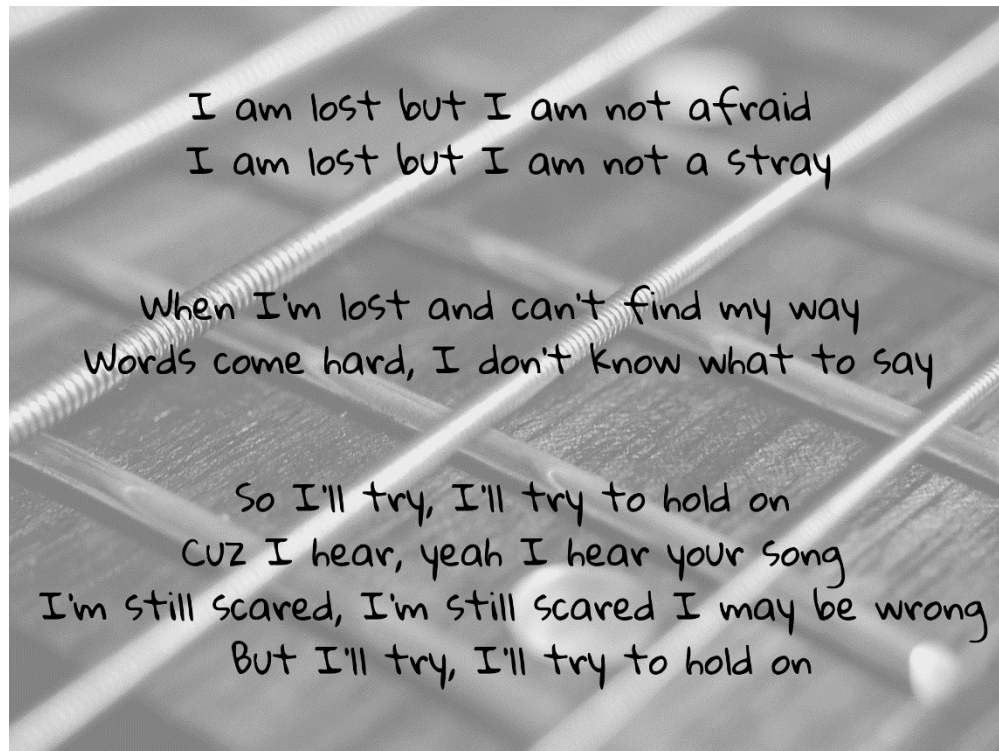
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By early 2017 I had entered Fowler's (1981) Stage 4. I realized I had grown up in a box and began to critically examine my faith. In contemporary parlance, this is often called "deconstruction." Lisa Gungor (2018), writing in *The Most Beautiful Thing I've Seen*, describes deconstruction poetically in the following excerpt:

Let's say our faith was like a sweater. Yarn: our ideology. Weave: our tradition. This is how you wear it. Don't change it, even if the sweater doesn't keep you warm any more. Even if it's too tight or the threads cut off oxygen at your neck. This is the way. Doubts and questions mean disrespect, and those are the seeds of evil, so just don't.

But over the years, a thread comes loose and you try to just tuck it in alongside the others. You can cover the fraying up. You can pull the thread and think, 'Oh, I don't need this one, because it is harmful to me; it's itchy and gets caught on corners.' It comes out easily. And the sweater stays together. Then you pull another, and another, and soon you find all the yarn is gone. You have deconstructed the entire thing. You are left naked. People gawk and run away, and you feel two opposing things: the freedom of glorious nakedness, and the fear of the same (p. 67).

Gungor's metaphor of a sweater perfectly captures the essence of deconstruction. In examining each piece of my faith and deciding what to keep and what to discard, it was both invigorating and terrifying. In January 2017 I wrote three songs that captured my spiritual journey. Patterns emerged in the lyrics:



Fear. Loss. Grief even. These themes are present in my lyrics, as well as my journal entries. I not only grieved for the spiritual loss of what I had always known but the social as well. Social and political insecurity grew prominent as I realized that I was no longer part of a group. I no longer had “my people.” Gone were the camps I grew up attending, the clubs where I met many of my college friends, the church events where I quickly built relationships whenever I moved to a new place, and the leaders I had looked up to. I was outside of them now, at least internally.

Externally, I could still walk the walk of an evangelical. For several years I “faked” it. I let people assume that I believed the same things they did. I used the right phrases or social cues at evangelical events to remain part of the in-group, while simultaneously I continued to read and explore what else there might be. I was too insecure to migrate until I had an idea of where I’d migrate to.

Yet, I began to write blog posts and social media posts that questioned Evangelicalism. It felt dangerous at first, knowing that most people who would see and read them consider themselves evangelical. During October 2016, after visiting a Franciscan hermitage, I wrote a post sharing my newly learned lessons from Franciscan theology. In May 2017 I criticized the limited reading list that received the “American Evangelical stamp of approval.” In July 2017 I compared evangelicals to a pile of manure in contrast to a quote from John Bunyan likening them to flowers.

By 2018 I was more open with my views. In response to an organization I was a part of wanting to keep track of the number of Christian converts as a metric of success I wrote:

March 23, 2018

*I need to tell you something: getting a specific number of people to say they are Christians by a certain time is not a measurement of success. It is a measurement of your failure to understand the gospel...Throwing Bibles at people and getting them to verbally agree with you and be identified as a Christian doesn't fix the world.*

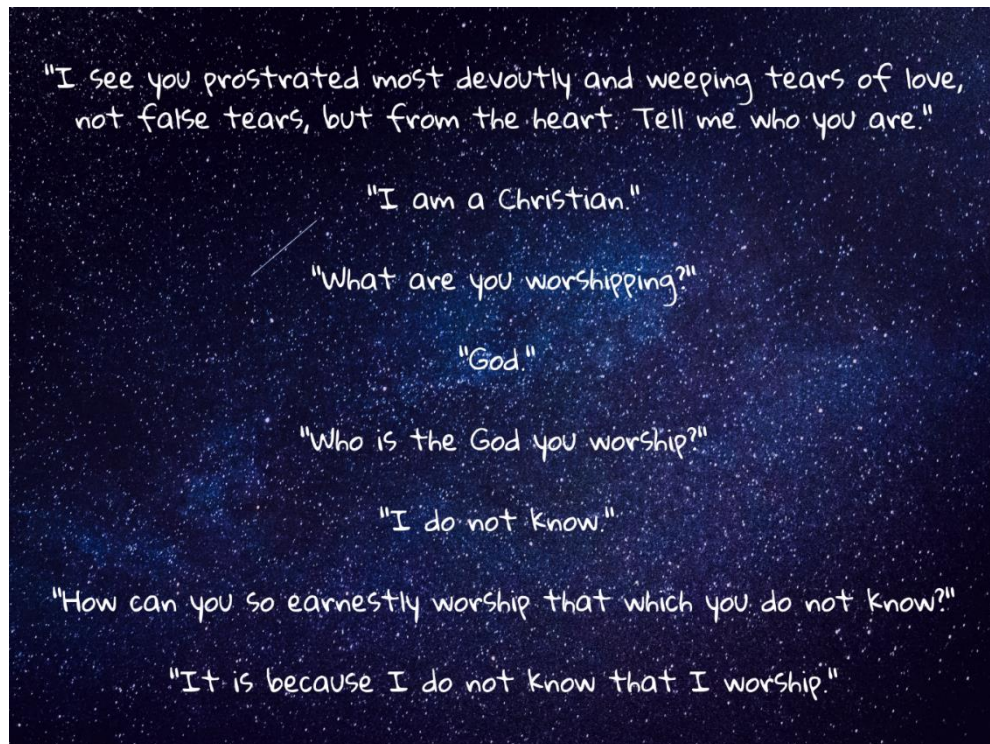
As Fowler (1981) points out, Stage 4 people are usually seen as “backsliders” to those in Stage 3. Even as I read more books on Christianity than ever before, and felt a true opening of my faith, I am sure there were people praying that I returned to my roots or saw the truth.

As mentioned, however, the loss of community was palpable. Churches provided a social safety net. Without a local church community, I started to explore alternatives. I listened to several podcasts regularly, such as *The Nomad Podcast* (Blower & Nash, 2018) *The Liturgists* (Gungor & McHargue, 2018), and *The Deconstructionist Podcast* (Narloch & Williamson, 2018). The online communities that formed around these podcasts contained fellow migrants. The online forums and Facebook groups could not replace the intimacy of a physical meeting, but they provided safe places for people to share their questions and struggles.

During my introduction to the online group for the *Nomad Podcast* (Blower & Nash, 2018) I explained that, although I left Evangelicalism, I still felt connected

with Christianity because, “I can still see love in the world around me, and that pulls me back to something greater than myself.” The importance of this online community, and others like it, can be seen in my closing statement from the same post: “Thanks for giving me a place to share where I’m not fearful that the torches and pitchforks will soon be chasing me.”

...



According to the stages of faith, many people that reach the skeptical Stage 4 (Fowler, 1981) or 3 (Peck, 1987) do not move beyond it. I have several friends who fit that description. They grew up in Evangelicalism, realized its faults, and left Christianity behind. They are now atheists or agnostics. I consider myself

fortunate in this arena. While I questioned and criticized my beliefs, doctrines, and traditions I never successfully criticized faith itself. My personal deconstruction wasn't so much a deconstruction of faith in a higher being, but rather a deconstruction of how I viewed such a being – the lens I was looking through.

I consider myself fortunate in this way because I didn't need to start over. I deconstructed the structure of my beliefs, but when I began to reconstruct a new structure, I wasn't starting from scratch. There were building materials leftover that I could use again.

As I entered Peck's (1987) Stage 4, the mystical-communal stage, I started to appreciate the paradoxes in life. I could see truths in contradictory narratives, and I realized that there can be truth in something, even if it is not factual or literal. This contrasted dramatically with my earlier need to logically explain everything.

As I wrote in a Facebook post:

November 16, 2017

*I don't have any answers, and one of the fantastic things I've been learning is that it's okay to not understand and have an answer to everything (contrary to my apologetics-infused "I'm right, you're wrong" mentality from only a few short years ago).*

When my wife and I moved to Bloomington-Normal, IL we did not have much luck finding a church that welcomed these new views. I would find a church online, get excited and hopeful, only to be quickly disappointed. I would read on their website statements I no longer believed or visit one Sunday morning and



immediately realize it would not become our home. Yet, every time I heard about a new community, I could not help but develop hope.

I felt there were many churches that I had not heard about, so I turned to Reddit. Reddit is an online community where people post and discuss internet content, similar to a forum. On January 27, 2019, I posted to the Bloomington-Normal group: “Does anyone know of any churches that are a bit more progressive in the area? Thanks.”

To my surprise, the community was uncharacteristically supportive. Reddit, and the internet in general, can be a breeding ground for hate and trolls. However, several people responded with genuine suggestions for local churches. I only received one caution:

*Be careful to not go the way of false Christianity in your quest. Jesus said wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to damnation...but narrow is the gate and strait is the way unto life eternal.*

Yes, that was more of what I expected and sounded remarkably similar to what I, myself, had told people in the past. A week after my post, I started this autoethnography project. With these new church suggestions in mind, my first journal entry began with the following:

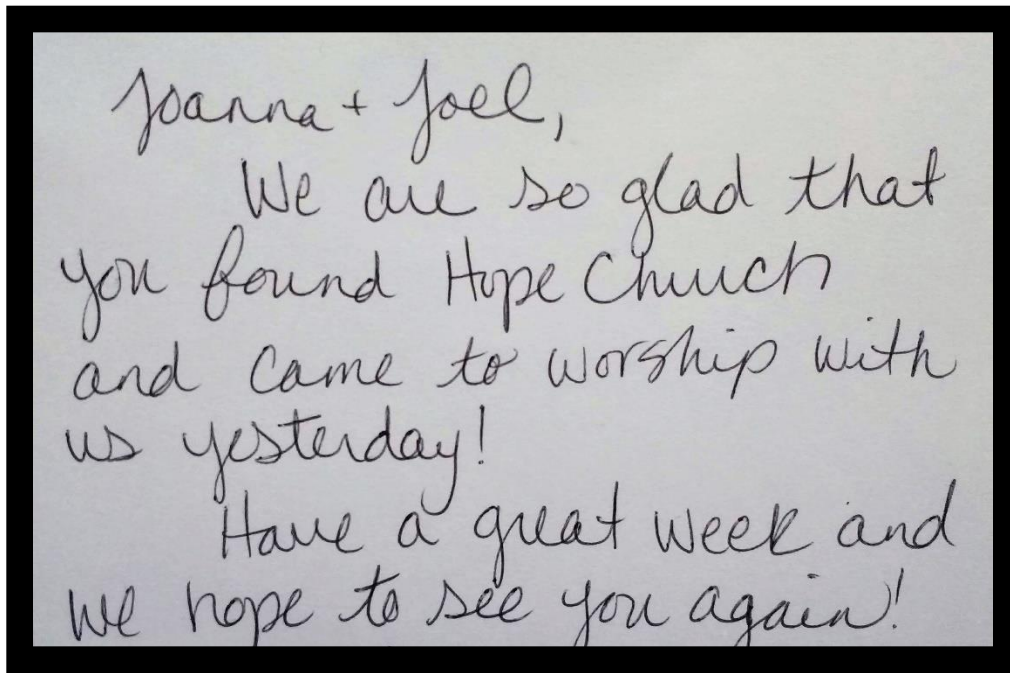
February 9, 2019

*Hope – that is the word most accurate in describing my feeling. Hope, only a little though. For years now, it feels like I have been afloat on a raft in an ocean, untethered to anything and at the mercy of the currents...I think it fits the true purpose of Christianity*

*to be ever questioning, moving, shifting in my beliefs and taking a journey. However, at times it can be very lonely.*

My wife and I visited one of the suggested churches, Hope Church, on Sunday, February 10, 2019. It was immediately clear that everyone and anyone was welcome at Hope. The church I grew up in always said they loved and welcomed everyone. But if a woman couldn't preach, or a gay man couldn't pass the offering plate, it certainly didn't feel welcoming to everyone. A few days later we received a greeting card in the mail from the two women pastors and the staff (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Note from the staff at Hope Church



We began attending Hope regularly and started participating in a weekly small group meeting called Pint Theology. After the first Pint Theology, I wrote in

my journal, “It was almost like a therapy group for people who felt they had been spiritual migrants.” We all had different journeys, but almost everyone could relate with that sense of losing a home and seeking another. Just like refugees, some of our journeys were more violent and hard and dangerous, and others, like my own, safer. But the quest for seeking safe harbor united us, nonetheless.

At the end of February, Hope Church began its own deconstruction process. Although Hope Church is an all-inclusive church, the denomination to which it belongs, United Methodist (UMC), is not. The denomination held a general conference in late February to vote on whether to become fully inclusive. Despite strong support from churches like Hope, the international delegation voted against adopting an all-inclusive stance. The pain felt by Hope’s congregants was visceral.

The conference was not a purely internal affair, either. I witnessed several pastors and authors I follow tweet about the decision on February 25:

*Rachel Held Evans - Grieving the loss of a church, or your place in it, can be as painful as grieving the loss of a loved one. Sending love and prayers to all who are grieving that loss today. I’m so sorry #GC2019*

*Nadia Bolz-Weber - There is God. And then there is the church. The less we conflate the two, the better. The church may reject God’s children, but God never does. To my queer siblings, I’m so sorry. You are glorious. #GC2019*

Hope Church wrestled with its own deconstruction in an attempt to understand its role in the United Methodist Church and what it stood for. In many ways, it mirrored my own process. When I felt betrayed by the evangelical church

because of its support for Trump, I began to seriously question my place in it. For me, the right decision was to leave Evangelicalism and migrate. For Hope Church, and many of its members, they felt betrayed by their denomination. They entered their own process of questioning their place within the structure of the UMC, but have chosen to remain in the system – to continue their practices and hold their ground in a stance of civil disobedience.

My relationship with Hope Church culminated in my wife and I becoming members on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019. But my relationship with Christianity and the Church has not reached an endpoint. For now, I have found a safe harbor to tie up my raft. I may be here awhile, stocking my raft with provisions and newly learned lessons. But undoubtedly, I will set off again – the journey of a spiritual migrant never ends. Hopefully, though, I will have a sail this time to help steer better.

Although this concludes the written work of my autoethnography, I don't believe it is the end of its use. I set out to use the method of autoethnography to better understand my own story. I wanted to create a rough map of my migration journey. Yet another purpose has arisen from these pages. Perhaps they will be useful for others to read, as well. All our stories are different, but sometimes it helps you to tell your own story by hearing someone else's. I was able to tell my journey of spiritual migration by using the words and ideas of others. While I sat on my raft, drifting in the sea, I survived by eating the morsels of wisdom and experience

of others. Their work kept me alive. It would be an honor if this autoethnography, this telling of my story, could provide sustenance to another spiritual migrant. We are all on journeys of our own, but we are not all alone on our journeys.



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## Appendix A

### James Fowler's Stages of Faith and Scott Peck's Stages of Faith

	Stage	Description	Simplified version By Scott Peck	
Stage 1	Intuitive-Projective	This is the stage of preschool children in which fantasy and reality often get mixed together. However, during this stage, our most basic ideas about God are usually picked up from our parents and/or society.	I. Chaotic-Antisocial	People stuck at this stage are usually self-centered and often find themselves in trouble due to their unprincipled living. If they do end up converting to the next stage, it often occurs in a very dramatic way.
Stage 2	Mythic-Literal	When children become school-age, they start understanding the world in more logical ways. They generally accept the stories told to them by their faith community but tend to understand them in very literal ways. [A few people remain in this stage through adulthood.]		
Stage 3	Synthetic-Conventional	Most people move on to this stage as teenagers. At this point, their life has grown to include several different social circles and there is a need to pull it all together. When this happens, a person usually adopts some sort of all-encompassing belief system. However, at this stage, people tend to have a hard time seeing outside their box and don't recognize that they are "inside" a belief system. At this stage, authority is usually placed in individuals or groups that represent one's beliefs. [This is the stage in which many people remain.]	II. Formal-Institutional	At this stage people rely on some sort of institution (such as a church) to give them stability. They become attached to the forms of their religion and get extremely upset when these are called into question.



Stage 4	Individuative-Reflective	This is the tough stage, often begun in young adulthood, when people start seeing outside the box and realizing that there are other "boxes". They begin to critically examine their beliefs on their own and often become disillusioned with their former faith. Ironically, the Stage 3 people usually think that Stage 4 people have become "backsliders" when in reality they have actually moved forward.	III. Skeptic-Individual	Those who break out of the previous stage usually do so when they start seriously questioning things on their own. A lot of the time, this stage ends up being very non-religious and some people stay in it permanently
Stage 5	Conjunctive Faith	It is rare for people to reach this stage before mid-life. This is the point when people begin to realize the limits of logic and start to accept the paradoxes in life. They begin to see life as a mystery and often return to sacred stories and symbols but this time without being stuck in a theological box.	IV. Mystical-Communal	People who reach this stage start to realize that there is truth to be found in both the previous two stages and that life can be paradoxical and full of mystery. Emphasis is placed more on community than on individual concerns.
Stage 6	Universalizing Faith	Few people reach this stage. Those who do live their lives to the full in service of others without any real worries or doubts.		

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